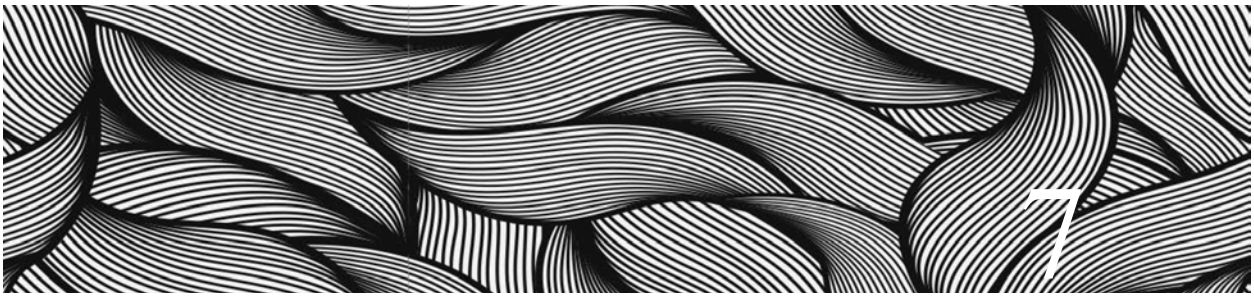

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Labour

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INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the notion of 'labour' in Marx's critical social theory and in particular its determining character as the key to his materialist perspective on human society and its historical development, seem to be beyond dispute.[1] It is also quite uncontroversial, at least on the basis of textual evidence, that Marx presented the simplest or most general determination of labour as consisting in the conscious and voluntary transformation of external nature by human beings in order to appropriate its potentialities for the satisfaction of human needs. Controversies arise, however, when it comes to establishing if Marx was right, whether in his views on the essential determinations of labour or concerning its defining role in the constitution and development of the forms of existence of human subjectivity.

Against the backdrop of these debates, this chapter will provide a comprehensive discussion of the notion of labour in Marxian social theory, with the aim of providing a systematic reconstruction of the 'unity of its many determinations', which appear scattered in Marx's own writings. In order to do so, it will address the multiple dimensions and aspects associated with this essential concept, both as they were originally formulated by Marx and in some of the main subsequent debates outside and within Marxism to which the former gave rise. Taking as the point of departure the simplest determination of human labour

as conscious life-activity, this chapter will probe further into the different, more concrete determinations which comprise the material character of production and its changing historical modes of existence. Through this close scrutiny of the concept of labour, the chapter will make two fundamental points. In the first, and substantively, it will bring out the centrality of the material determinations of human productive subjectivity for the comprehension of the content and historical trajectory of society. Second, and formally, it will show that it is possible to find an underlying 'systematic' unity which articulates those different determinations of the Marxian concept of labour into a 'concrete whole'.

MARX'S DISCOVERY OF LABOUR, OR CONSCIOUS LIFE-ACTIVITY, AS HUMANITY'S 'SPECIES-BEING'

Marx's discovery of the centrality of labour to social life can be traced back to the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844 (Marx, 1992a [1844]) and was a direct result of Marx's first attempt at the critical investigation of the specific nature of modern society through the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1991 [1821]), i.e. through an analysis of bourgeois political forms. As Marx himself tells us in the short intellectual 'autobiography' found in the *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1992b [1859], the main conclusion he reached was that the key to the comprehension of the specific nature of capitalist society was not to be found in the critique of the doctrine of the state. Instead, the critique of modern society had to start with the critique of political economy in order to, then, continue into a critique of the state (1992b [1859]: 425–6). The former was the science that was able to penetrate the 'internal physiology' of the modern world to be found in 'civil society' and, more precisely, in 'private property'.

In light of this conclusion, in the *1844 Manuscripts* (1992a [1844]) Marx turns his attention to the material reproduction of human life as the key to the understanding of society and its historical development. As Arthur points out, in that early text Marx 'for the first time … attributes fundamental ontological significance to *productive activity*. Through material production humanity comes to be what it is … material production is the "*mediation*" in which the unity of man with nature is established' (1986: 5). In other words, Marx identifies labour or productive activity as the specific form in which humanity reproduces its existence as part of nature.

This means that although the human life-process undoubtedly possesses its qualitatively differentiated 'species-character', constituted by 'the nature of its life activity' (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 328), it nonetheless remains a concrete form of the natural *life-process in general*. In this sense, labour realizes in its own peculiar fashion the determinations entailed by *any* form of life-activity, namely: being a natural process of *self-reproduction* through the material interchange with 'inorganic nature', which is 'life-producing-life' (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 328).[2]

Consequently, in order fully to account for the specificity of labour, Marx also needed to further uncover its *immanent* more abstract determination as a mode of existence of 'life activity in general', of 'species-life' as such.

Marx's clearest rendition of this immanent natural content in the determination of human productive activity can be found in a passage from the third of the *Paris Manuscripts*, in the context of his critique of both idealism (Hegel) and (abstract) materialism (Feuerbach) from the viewpoint of what he calls at this stage 'consistent naturalism or humanism', which is the 'only [perspective] capable of comprehending the process of world history' (1992a [1844]: 389):

> Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand equipped with natural powers, with vital powers, he is an active natural being; these powers exist in him as dispositions and capacities, as drives. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his drives exist outside him as objects independent of him; but these objects are objects of his need, essential objects, indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his essential powers. (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 389–90)

As with any living natural being, the relation of the human being to nature consists of a process whereby the individual actualizes its own bodily 'vital' powers (i.e. what a few years later Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology* (1976 [1845]) would term its 'corporeal organization'), with the purpose of appropriating the objective potentialities immanent in their natural environment. This is the material process that, later in his life, Marx would refer to as the 'metabolism between man and nature' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 133). Moreover, as with every animal life-form, this involves the material expenditure of the living individual's corporeality in order to act upon external nature in a particular fashion corresponding to its species-determination, whose end result is the appropriation and consumption of the 'essential objects' that satisfy its needs, thereby reconstituting and transforming the materiality of its bodily existence.

Thus, the defining qualitative attribute of the living individual lies in the material potential to self-reproduce; that is, to posit through their own activity the renewal of the conditions for their continued existence as an 'objective natural being'. This material potential for self-reproduction is expressed in their *cognitive capacity*, which is constituted by their vital, living power to recognize the mutual 'affinity' between their own material potentialities and those of their objective environment (Iñigo Carrera, 2007: 43–4). Through the exercise of their cognizing activity, the living individual has therefore the power to satisfy their own needs by organizing and regulating the actual unfolding of their bodily action upon external nature. On the basis of all these determinations, the living individual is determined as *subject*, they are endowed with *subjectivity* (as opposed to the sheer objectivity of non-living forms of nature).

According to Marx's discussion in the *Paris Manuscripts*, in its simplest expression the distinctiveness of the human species-being (hence of *human* subjectivity proper) appears at first sight to involve a merely *quantitative* difference

from animal life-forms, one *of degree of universality* in the *scope* of its appropriation of inorganic nature (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 329). However, Marx stresses that underlying this quantitative difference there is a *qualitative* specificity in human subjectivity, which he finds in the fact that the human being has *conscious life-activity* (1992a [1844]: 328). Hence, Marx saw the specifically *human form* of the natural life-process in the fact that human beings regulate the appropriation of the objective powers of the natural environment through the organization of the externalization of their own vital powers by means of *thought*, *conscious cognition* or *knowledge*, that is, by *ideally* appropriating nature's potentialities as the necessary first step before its real appropriation through the effective unfolding of action. In other words, human beings are not simply bearers of subjectivity, but also *know or recognize themselves as subjects* in the process of affirming their species-powers, thereby 'making life activity itself an object of [their] will and consciousness' (1992a [1844]: 328).

Now, as Marx and Engels clarified some years later in *The German Ideology* against the backdrop of the Young Hegelians' 'empty phrases about consciousness devoid of any material premises' (1976 [1845]: 37), this conscious subjectivity is but the expression of the fact that human beings 'can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like', but 'they themselves distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence' (1976 [1845]: 31). In other words, in this text Marx and Engels want to throw into relief the *immanent material connection* between the determination of consciousness as a distinctively human attribute and the fundamentally *mediated* character of the human being's life-process. Their emphasis on the production of means of subsistence is therefore meant to stress the distinctively *transformative* mode of the process of metabolic exchange with nature as the *simplest content* of the human species-being which takes on a more developed mode of existence in the *form* of their conscious and voluntary being.

As Sayers (2007: 434) aptly emphasizes, the primordial and most general determination of human labour, which qualitatively distinguishes it from the broadly *unmediated* character of the life-process of non-human animals, is to be 'form-giving' life-activity.[3] Thus, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels stress that the conscious and voluntary form taken by the human life-process is not a dogmatic 'philosophical postulate' but a determinate, 'empirically verifiable', objective natural expression of the 'corporeal (or bodily) organization' of 'living human individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature' (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 31). Although in the latter text Marx and Engels do not 'go into the actual corporeal nature of man' (1976 [1845]: 31), it is clear, as Fracchia (2005) remarks, that this 'corporeal organization' entails, in the first place, the evolutionary emergence of the human brain as the bodily instrument whose functioning is expressed in the form of consciousness. But, in the second place, Fracchia rightly adds that it is also evident that the development of the specific configuration of the human brain has been in turn the outcome of

prior evolutionary changes in the corporeal organization of hominids eventually leading to the *Homo Sapiens*, all of which made possible the transformative or productive character of its mode of life based on labour: opposable thumbs, bipedalism, binocular vision, etc. (Fracchia, 2008: 39). This emphasis on the 'corporeal roots' of human beings and their subjectivity might seem at first sight a self-evident triviality, yet it is not if, as Fracchia (2017) notes, familiarity ends up breeding neglect, as is arguably the case in much contemporary social theory. Thus, the relevance of this reminder about the natural and evolutionary dimensions of human subjectivity can be said to transcend the historical context of Marx and Engels's polemic against the Young Hegelians and has become very contemporaneous.[4]

In this sense, consciousness is the most potent evolutionary development that eventually emerged to regulate the greater cognitive complexity entailed by the growing instrumental, spatial, temporal and personal separation between the initial action that sets into motion the process of human metabolism with nature and its end result, which is achieved with the material reproduction of the corporeality of an individual human being through the consumption of the product of labour (Iñigo Carrera, 2007: 45). In other words, as available paleoanthropological scientific evidence confirms, consciousness evolved as a result of the *increasingly mediated character* assumed by the forms of practical transformative activity of our *hominid* predecessors, and which eventually led to the emergence of strictly human (in the sense of the modern *Homo Sapiens*) modes of life.[5]

In light of the determinations of human labour unfolded so far, we can now proceed to further specify the way human beings distinguish themselves from animals and why they do so. As we have seen, according to Marx the simplest difference consists in the capacity to produce its means of subsistence. This is the specific determination of the human life-process seen, as it were, from a synchronic point of view. However, that simple specificity manifests itself also in a further determination when grasped from a *developmental* perspective. That is, when seen from the perspective of the way in which human beings *expand* the potentialities of their process of metabolism in contradistinction to other animal life-forms (Iñigo Carrera, 2007: 44). Due to their more limited ability to modify external nature to make it apt to satisfy their needs, non-human animals can only develop their capacity to appropriate natural forms by means of a genetically induced mutation of their own corporeality, which allows them to *adapt* to what they confront as *given* conditions of existence, i.e. by *evolving* into another species (Fracchia, 2017). Conversely, in having developed the capacity to alter their life conditions through conscious productive practice, human beings have also *qualitatively* 'sublated' the way in which, as living subjects, they expand the powers of their metabolic process with nature. The key to those developmental dynamics of the natural life-process no longer only resides in further biological speciation through the modification of bodily organs. Instead, humans can 'change their own nature' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 283) through the development

of the transformative powers of their life-process, i.e. *of the productive powers of their own labour*. The development of the 'material forces of production', Marx thus concluded, becomes determined as the most general *qualitative content* that gives underlying unity to the 'history of humanity' (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 43).

As a result of these specific developmental dynamics, human beings can not only universally expand the areas of nature which become determined as concrete forms of their activity, but they can also complexify the mediations involved before the final appropriation of natural objects as use-values that are immediately apt for the satisfaction of human needs, thereby consuming properly 'human objects'. In other words, they can extend and deepen the 'humanization of nature' (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 329, 352–4; Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 39).

Furthermore, this applies to all kinds of human need, whether they spring from the 'stomach or the imagination' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 125). Thus, the materiality of the satisfaction of human needs involved in the 'metabolic exchange with external nature' by means of labour does not only refer to 'those of the individual … reduced to a natural subject' (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 528), but also to 'historic needs … created by production itself, social needs' (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 527). Moreover, they are not just of a 'physical' nature (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 275, 341) but also include 'intellectual and social requirements' whose extent and number 'is conditioned by the general level of civilization' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 341). In a similar vein, the product of labour to be consumed comprises not only 'goods' but also so-called 'services', whose result may not be a 'useful object' but still involves a *material* 'useful effect' which also changes the form of external nature (Marx, 1978 [1885]: 135). As Sayers (2007: 444–8) perceptively notes, the same could be said about the 'symbolic' and 'affective' content of use-values that is so central to contemporary theories of 'immaterial labour' (Hardt and Negri, 2005). In *all* cases, the satisfaction of those needs is the necessary material form for the reproduction and/or expansion of the productive powers of individuals (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 717fn), that is, of the 'aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets into motion whenever he produces a use-value *of any kind*' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 270, *emphasis added*; see also 717). In other words, there is no satisfaction of 'physical' and intellectual needs through the consumption of use-values which is not determined as an inner moment of the development of the specific attributes or powers of the human being as an essentially *labouring* or *productive* subject, i.e. of the development of the 'human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature' (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 488).

By virtue of these determinations in their synchronic and diachronic unity, Marx argued in an obvious 'activist' twist to Feuerbach's (2008 [1841]) 'contemplative' argument in the first chapter of his *The Essence of Christianity*, the human being does not simply *have* a determinate species-character but actually

is a species-being, 'a being which treats the species as its own essential being or itself as a species-being' (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 329).[6]

At this juncture, it might be worth remarking that this early discovery of the specific determination of the human being as a *productive* subject, or of human individuality as an expression and mode of development of her/his *labouring activity*, would remain unaltered throughout the rest of Marx's works. The exposition by the 'mature Marx' of the general determinations of the labour process in chapter 7 of *Capital*, Volume I, does not involve any substantive change in comparison with the discussion of the human species-being by the 'young Marx' of the *Paris Manuscripts* (1992a [1844]) or by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1976 [1845]). Labour is thus defined as follows:

> A process between man and nature by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets into motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 283)

Additionally, what gives labour 'a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic', transcending those 'instinctive forms … which remain at the animal level', is the fact that 'at the end of every labour process a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 283–4). This result, Marx continues, emphasizing the form-giving character of the human metabolic process, 'is a use-value, a piece of natural material adapted to human needs by means of a change in form' (1976a [1867]: 287), whose transformation is furthermore effected *via* 'the use and construction of instruments of labour', which, 'although present in germ among certain species of animals, is characteristic of the specifically human labour process' (1976a [1867]: 286). In sum, all the determinations of human labour as conscious, transformative life-activity are maintained by Marx in the most developed version of the critique of political economy unfolded in *Capital*.[7]

THE IMMANENT SOCIAL CHARACTER OF LABOUR AND HUMAN PRODUCTIVE SUBJECTIVITY: 'SOCIAL BEING' AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The '*fashioning* of inorganic nature' (Marx, 1992a [1844]: 328–9) in a form 'adapted to human needs' does not exhaust the intrinsically mediated character of human life-activity underpinning the necessity of its conscious form. A further mediation that adds to the complexity of the human process of metabolism lies in the necessary *social* character of productive activity (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 83–4). For, although human productive powers are borne by each particular individual, the development and actualization of these potentialities characterizing the

species – i.e. the realization of the transformative powers of the human being – can only affirm themselves through the organic unity of individual lives, through social life. In effect, as Iñigo Carrera points out (2007: 47–8), individually borne human productive powers can only be constituted socially, that is, they can only develop as a result of the productive action of other individuals (who, for instance, have participated in the production of the use-values whose consumption resulted in the productive attributes borne by the former individual's labour-power). Moreover, the individual labourer produces use-values not solely for her/his own consumption, but for others, that is, *social* use-values. As Marx puts it in the *Paris Manuscripts*:

> We have seen how … man produces man, himself and other men; how the object, which is the direct activity of his individuality, is at the same time his existence for other men, their existence and their existence for him … Activity and consumption … in their content are social activity and social consumption. (1992a [1844]: 349)

Note, however, that this does not simply mean that human productive activity always presupposes a 'social context' within which it takes place (e.g. sociologically conceived social 'institutions' that 'structure', 'condition' or 'constrain' human 'agency'). Thus posed, the relation between the social and individual character of human productive activity is rendered completely external. This is why a few lines later, through the example of the *seemingly* isolated activity 'in the field of science', Marx throws into relief the *immanent* social character of labour as an individual action, i.e. its determination as a material expenditure of *individually borne* yet *socially constituted* corporeal powers to transform external nature, consciously, into a means for human life:

> It is above all necessary to avoid once more establishing 'society' as an abstraction over against the individual. The individual *is* the *social being*. His vital expression – even when it does not appear in the direct form of a communal expression, conceived in association with other men – is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man's individual and species-life are not two *distinct things*. (1992a [1844]: 350)

Thus, the organization and regulation of the individual process of human metabolism with external nature acquires an additional qualitative and quantitative cognitive complexity. It needs to affirm itself as an organic 'element of the total labour of society' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 165), i.e. to posit its underlying *general social unity* through its material articulation with the life-processes of other human individuals. To put it differently, the production of life through the expenditure and development of the *productive powers or forces* of the human individual, i.e. a material or natural relation, takes on necessary concrete shape (and is thereby necessarily mediated) in and through *social relations*, which are therefore determined as social relations of *production*:[8]

> The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation – social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 43)

The essential *most general* determination at stake in all social forms of the human life-process is therefore the organization of the unity of the social character of individual labours, that is, the social regulation of the allocation of the total labour of society in its different individual concrete forms in order to reproduce and expand the materiality of the productive powers of human beings. The *historically changing character* of the social relations of production is given by the specific form in which each society mediates 'the participation of the individual in general production' or the positing of 'the labour of the individual … as social labour' (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 171–2).[9]

On the other hand, this means that in its material condition as the specifically human capacity to organize the life-process, consciousness always entails a twofold determination as much as the labouring activity that it organizes and regulates (Iñigo Carrera, 2007: 43–9). Consciousness thereby does not simply undertake the regulation of the individual appropriation of the potentialities of external nature in order to transform it, but must also mediate the establishment of individual labour's immanent unity with the socially general metabolic process of which it is an organic element. In other words, consciousness needs to articulate the determination of individual productive activity as part of the general social division of labour. As an attribute borne by the individuality and corporeality of each human being, consciousness is thus the personal power or capacity to partake in the establishment of the unity of social labour through individual productive action, i.e. to regulate the social character of individual labour.

In this sense, consciousness, and along with it language (hence, *human subjectivity* proper), are also 'evolutionary' products of the development of the *social* character of labour:

> Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; *language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men*. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not '*relate*' itself to anything, it does not '*relate*' itself at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 44, *emphasis added*)[10]

The determination of consciousness by the social character of labour not only pertains to its natural genesis. It also underpins its subsequent modes of existence and development, so that, as Marx and Engels stress in their well-known aphoristic statement, 'consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*], and the being of men is their actual life-process' (1976 [1845]: 36). Moreover, insofar as this actual life-process is *form-determined* in *historically changing* social modes of existence, so will be the concrete forms of human subjectivity that, in turn, mediate the establishment of the unity of the social relations of production through the conscious and voluntary action of individuals. In other words, all concrete social forms assumed by human conscious and voluntary subjectivity are the way in which individuals see both

themselves and the historically determined modes of existence of their social relations, which are two sides of the same coin once the apparent exteriority between society and individual is overcome. Through the different forms of subjectivity, human beings therefore organize the unfolding of their individual actions as organic moments of the material reproduction of the *socially mediated* unity of their metabolic process with nature, i.e. their consciousness is always determined as 'consciousness of existing practice' (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 45).

It follows that the point of Marx's materialism is not to conceive of social being as a self-subsistent existence that externally 'causes', 'conditions' or 'functionally moulds', from such exteriority, an equally self-subsisting consciousness. Such severance and consequent external relation of social being and consciousness, with the latter floating in mid-air in an ontologically conceived 'superstructure' of society, would certainly be idealist. Analogously to the relationship between productive forces and social relations discussed earlier, the key to overcoming such dualistic representations is to grasp social being or social relations of production as the inner material and social *content*, which is necessarily realized, and therefore exists, in the *form* of the determinations of the consciousness of the human individual.[11] As Marx bluntly and succinctly puts it in the *1861–63 Manuscripts*, 'social relations only exist between human beings to the extent that they think' (1988 [1861–3]: 232). In other words, there are no social relations of production or forms of human productive practice (and, *a fortiori*, no material productive forces of labour) whose determinations could be conceived of in abstraction from (i.e. not *immanently* mediated by) consciousness. Productive powers of social labour, social relations of production and forms of consciousness constitute the indissoluble unity between the content and form of the determinations of human productive subjectivity and practice in the process of 'natural history', that is, of human labour and its historical development.

CONTROVERSIES OVER MARX'S PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN LABOUR

A first strand of critiques of Marx's notion of labour emerged outside Marxism in the second half of the twentieth century and are of sociological or philosophical origin. Thus, Habermas (1971 [1968], 1987 [1985]) argues that Marx's conception of labour one-sidedly conceives of human practice as 'monological' or merely instrumental activity, and fails to throw into relief the constitutive 'interactional' or 'communicative' dimensions of human action. In other words, Marx is read as unable to grasp the difference between 'labour' and 'interaction' or, in Habermas' later formulation, that between 'instrumental' and 'communicative' action, which allegedly lies at the basis of the social life-process. For her part, and in a similar vein, Arendt (1998 [1958]) considers that Marx confuses or conflates the threefold distinction that constitutes the human being's *vita activa*, that is,

'labour' (as animal-like, merely biological metabolic activity with nature), 'work' (as purposeful activity that humanizes nature in a lasting, non-ephemeral way), and even more starkly, 'action' (as radically self-initiating, necessarily collective and 'public', end in itself). In light of the earlier discussion, one could argue that these critiques are predicated on a misreading of Marx's perspective on the determinations of labour (particularly serious in the case of Arendt) (Holman, 2011), insofar as they overlook the irreducible *immanent social character of productive activity*. Thus, it is these authors who actually, and wrongly, reduce labour to an asocial, purely individual material interchange with nature. As a consequence, they then need to come up with other dimensions of human action, which are therefore rendered 'autonomous' from the material reproduction process, in order for social life to attain unity. In other words, in Habermas' and Arendt's respective approaches, the intrinsic unity between the different determinations of human labour become 'fossilized' into extrinsically related 'dimensions' of human action or, worse still, into plainly distinct forms of human action.[12]

In the second place, some Marxists themselves have raised certain objections that partly take issue with (the early) Marx's own treatment of labour, insofar as it involves an 'affirmative' view of labour as the 'transhistorical' essence of human life which would be emancipated with the overcoming of capital. Instead, they put forward a negative critique of the historically specific self-mediating or ontological role of labour in capitalism, which must actually be abolished under communism. Paradigmatically, this is the case of Postone's (1996) more broadly discussed work and of the lesser-known but similar approach by Kurz and the German *Wertkritik* (Jappe, 2014; Larsen et al., 2014). More concretely in the case of Postone, he argues that whereas in non-capitalist societies 'the social distribution of labour and its products is effected by … manifest social relations', in 'commodity-determined society' (i.e. capitalism) '*labour itself constitutes a social mediation in lieu of overt social relations*' (Postone, 1996: 149–50). According to Postone (1996: 148), this socially self-mediating role of labour in capitalism in turn derives from the dual character that it acquires, by virtue of which it not only produces use-values for others as intentional activity that transforms nature in a determinate fashion (what Marx terms *concrete labour*) but also acts as a means of acquisition of the products of others. And since 'there is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of the labour expended and the specific nature of the product acquired by means of that labour', that *historically determinate function* of labour as 'means of acquisition' must be done by abstracting 'from the specificity of … its own concrete form' and on the basis of its character as labour in general (i.e. as abstract labour) (Postone, 1996: 151–2). Social interdependence in capitalism, Postone concludes, is not achieved by means of overt social relations but specifically by (abstract) labour itself (1996: 151–2). As a further corollary, Postone (1996: 58–68) states that the 'traditional Marxist' notion of labour that sees its socially constitutive role as a generic or transhistorical determination leads of necessity to the naturalization of the

capitalist form of labour and, *a fortiori*, of the alienated or objectified forms of social mediation (and concomitant impersonal forms of domination) to which the former gives rise.

Now, there are several and wide-ranging problematic and controversial issues in Postone's undeniably thought-provoking contribution; here I can only mention two which are of immediate relevance to this chapter. In the first place, and at a formal argumentative level, one could say that Postone's rejection of the generic determination of labour as the specific form of action that is socially constitutive of human subjectivity is based on a combination of terminological conflation (between 'labour' and 'abstract labour') and *non-sequitur* reasoning.[13] Leaving aside other shortcomings in his discussion of the socially mediating function of labour in capitalism,[14] all that he manages to demonstrate is that in this society the social positing of labour is uniquely established on the basis of its abstract or general character. But this does not necessarily mean that labour as such, broadly understood as human transformative activity upon nature, does not play this social function in non-capitalist societies. It might as well mean, as Marx himself argues in *Capital*, that in those other societies the intrinsic social character of individual labour is established on the basis of its particular, concrete character (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 170–1), which still is an immanent determination of the organization of social *labour*, and not of other, undetermined forms of social relations lacking in material, productive content, whatever those might be.

This leads us to a second, substantive weakness of Postone's approach. Postone (1996: 56) does not seem to disagree with Marx's view that 'the entire productive activity of man, through which his metabolic interchange with nature is mediated' (1991 [1894]: 954) 'is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society' (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 133). Moreover, he concedes that 'labour, of course, has a social character in all social formations' (Postone, 1996: 150). However, on closer inspection it transpires that for Postone this *social character* is not *immanent* in the very materiality of labour. Instead, Postone submits that 'in noncapitalist societies, laboring activities are social by virtue of the matrix of overt social relations in which they are embedded', the latter being 'the constituting principle of such societies', so that the 'various labors are imbued with meaning by the social relations that are their context' (Postone, 1996: 150). The very choice of terms in Postone's formulations ('embeddedness', 'social context') betrays the irreducible externality in the relation that he posits between 'labouring activities', which are represented as a sheer material process lacking in immanent social content and, on the other side, 'manifest social relations', whose inner purpose and general unity (i.e. their *raison d'être*) is never *positively* spelt out by Postone (they are only *negatively* defined as not grounded in labour), but which are nonetheless said to impose, from such exteriority, their (self-grounded?) meaning and significance to labour and its products (Postone, 1996: 171–3).

Lastly, the other significant controversy among Marxists which I shall mention in this section concerns the essential developmental dynamic which,

according to Marx, underlies and gives unity to the historically evolving modes of existence of human subjectivity, namely the development of the material productive forces of labour. In the view of certain critical commentators, this perspective can only lead to a 'technologically determinist' materialist philosophy of history, in which, the 'exogenous' development of productive forces (understood as instruments of production or as a particular 'combination' of means of production and labour-power required by a certain technique of production, i.e. in both cases as 'things') acts as the motor that mechanically engenders a linear succession of 'corresponding modes of production' in a rigid evolutionary chronological sequence. As a result, these critics conclude, the Marxian 'materialist conception' implies an 'objectivistic' view which downplays or simply ignores the role of human subjectivity and action in the development of history (Gunn, 1992). As Clarke (1980: 21–2) points out, however, a first problem with this line of thought is that such a crude 'technological determinism' is completely alien to Marx's ideas and is more a reflection of its codification into a dogmatic philosophy of history by the orthodox Marxist tradition, in particular that which was consolidated as the state ideology of the former Soviet Union.[15] More specifically, Clarke forcefully shows in his pioneering critique of structuralist Marxism, a crucial shortcoming of the orthodox reading of Marx's thought lies in the very notion of production, which the Marxist orthodoxy represented as an abstractly 'technical' process, with social relations brought down to relations of *distribution* constituted by ownership of means of production, and *extrinsically* superimposed onto the direct labour process (Clarke, 1980: 21–2).[16]

In contradistinction to this orthodox reading, we have seen that Marx's account of the determinations of the labour process involves the indissoluble and contradictory *intrinsic* unity between the material relation between human beings and nature and its socially mediated character (hence between productive forces, social relations of production and their actualization in and through the conscious practice of individuals). We have also seen that 'productive forces' do not simply belong in a world of objects or 'things' (i.e. the instruments of production), abstractly external to human subjectivity, with their mutual relation represented as mechanistic causality or functional/structural correspondence. Or rather, they do comprise the world of things but to the extent that the latter are grasped as 'products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified' (Marx, 1993 [1857–8]: 706). Moreover, we have argued earlier that there is no conceivable shape of the productive forces which does not exist in and through the form-determinations of consciousness. The former's historical development is, of necessity, that of the *consciousness of human beings*, albeit materialistically grasped as essentially productive subjects. In sum, the development of the forces of production is tantamount to the development of the materiality of *human productive subjectivity*. In this sense, 'productive forces' belong in the

innermost realm of human individuality and, more precisely, of the specifically human capacities or powers for conscious transformative action. So this view can hardly lead, as implied by the critical commentators referred to earlier, to an 'objectivistic' denial of subjectivity and action in the unfolding of history. What it does deny, however, is the rendition of human consciousness and will (hence of human subjectivity and action) as idealistic constructs, which can only thereby be grounded on an abstract natural freedom of the individual, and therefore deprives the very specificity of the conscious human subject that it purports to extol of any material foundation in the movement of its life-activity as a 'sensuous objective being'. By contrast, Marx's view that the development of the productive forces of labour constitutes the essential content of history uncovers the immanent (as opposed to mechanistic) material determination of human subjectivity and its conscious and voluntary activity in the social life-process.[17]

Notes

1 In this chapter, and following Marx's usage in his later writings, I will use the term 'labour' (*Arbeit*) as denoting human *productive activity* in general, that is, as broadly as possible as 'formative activity' upon nature (Sayers, 2007). The terminology was different in the early writings such as the *1844 Paris Manuscripts* or the *German Ideology* (Arthur, 1986: 12–19). In these latter texts, the term 'labour' was sometimes equated with *alienated* productive activity under the rule of capital, whereas 'self-activity' or 'practical human activity' tended to denote the conscious transformation of nature by human beings. This is the reason why it is possible to find various passages in the early writings in which Marx states that human emancipation and the supersession of alienation entail the 'abolition of labour' (e.g. Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845]: 87).

2 On the Hegelian lineage of this perspective on the determinations of the natural life-process, as well as on the 'organic/inorganic nature' distinction, see Foster and Burkett (2000).

3 As Sayers (2007) also notes, this broad view of labour as form-giving activity upon nature can be traced back to Hegel (cf. 1977 [1807]: 118; 1991 [1821]: 56, 196–7). This is not to deny that other species are capable of 'objectification' (albeit mostly instinctually rather than intentionally), in the sense of 'transforming what is naturally given into worlds made in the image of their own needs and capacities' (Fracchia, 2005: 44); a phenomenon of which Marx was perfectly aware (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 283, 1992a [1844]: 329). However, not only is the transformative power of non-human animals very limited and one-sided (Fracchia, 2017), but its human forms entail not just a quantitative difference (i.e. one of degree) but a qualitative self-differentiation of the natural life-process beyond its *merely* 'animalistic' modes of existence (and this includes whatever incipient 'mental' powers for 'reasoning' could be found among non-human animals).

4 In effect, as McNally suggests (2001: 79), with the advent of post-modernism as the dominant form of self-proclaimed radical social thought, any reference to natural determinations in human life is usually seen as an old-fashioned 'modernist prejudice'. On the other hand, the question gets even more compounded by the ideological use of evolutionary theory made by 'sociobiology', which naturalizes existing forms of domination by locating their source in our genes (McNally, 2001: 79). However, the post-modern reaction that stresses the 'cultural production of the body' could be said to be its mirror image, substituting a 'sociological/cultural' reductionism for a biological one. In other words, the mere reversal of the terms of the relationship between nature and society does not do away with the inevitable externality of their connection thus conceived. Instead, the challenge for a critical materialist standpoint is to overcome the *dualism* in the relationship between nature and society, which means recognizing their 'unity-in-difference'.

5 See on this McNally´s stylized but well-informed account of the evolution of human thought and language, which shows that crucial in this process has been the 'use of intermediary objects (such as tools) to affect the environment to determined ends' (2001: 93).
6 An insightful and pioneering discussion of this point can be found in Colletti's *Marxism and Hegel* (1973 [1969]), who also traces the intellectual lineage of Marx's discussion of the human being as a species-being further back than Feuerbach's (2008 [1841]) *The Essence of Christianity* (Colletti, 1973 [1969]: 234–43). Of particular significance is Colletti's discussion of the qualitative specificity of human beings as natural living subjects vis-à-vis other natural life-forms, which gives them the character of a *genus*, vis-à-vis the rest of the animal *species* (Colletti, 1973 [1969]: 244–6). For this reason, as the translator of *Marxism and Hegel* rightly notes, 'generic-being' is actually a more adequate English rendition of the German *Gattungswesen* (Colletti, 1973 [1969]: 233, fn. 76).
7 For a contrary reading, see Wendling (2009: 62–6, 83–8, 96–7), who submits that Marx changed his views (albeit with ambiguity), from an initial 'vitalist' perspective in which labour was seen as the self-actualization and form-giving objectification of human subjectivity in the natural world, to an 'energeticist paradigm' adopted from the thermodynamic science of the scientific materialists.
8 Thus, social relations of production are not for Marx simply 'economic' but encompass the unity of the human life-process in all of its moments (Marx, 1977 [1847]: 212).
9 That is the gist of Marx´s oft-quoted letter to Kugelmann (Marx, 2010 [1868]: 68).
10 Again, as McNally (2001: 100–3) reports, contemporary scientific evidence from evolutionary theory validates Marx and Engels' insights on the qualitative specificity of the social character of tool-making (or 'co-operative heterotechnic toolmaking' as this author puts it) as a distinctively human phenomenon, on the one hand, and on its intrinsic material connection with the emergence of consciousness and language, on the other.
11 In this sense, Marx's whole discussion of the fetish-like character of the commodity could be seen as the *simplest* expression of the historically specific mode of existence of the immanent unity between productive forces of human labour, social being and forms of consciousness in the capitalist mode of production (Starosta, 2017). That is why Marx can claim *both* that value is the thing-like form of existence of social relations between people (Marx, 1976a [1867]: 166) *and* that the reduction of the 'material thing to the abstraction, *value* … is a primordial and hence unconsciously instinctive operation of their brain' (Marx, 1976b [1867]: 36).
12 For an early Marxist reply to Arendt, see Suchting (1962). A more recent methodologically minded Marxist assessment of the weaknesses of Arendt's threefold distinction can be found in Holman (2011). For a Marxist critique of Habermas along the lines suggested above, see Reichelt (2000), Elbe (2017) and Sayers (2007: 446). Postone (1996: 231) also develops an insightful Marxist critique of Habermas, albeit based on his idiosyncratic rejection of the generic constitutive role of labour in the development of human subjectivity.
13 This terminological conflation between 'labour' and 'abstract labour' is also key to the German *Wertkritik*'s 'Manifesto against Labour' (Krisis Group, 1999).
14 For instance, he ambiguously and interchangeably posits *labour* or the *product of labour* as performing the function of social mediation (Postone, 1996: 150).
15 The standard source for this codification is Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (2013 [1938]). However, a more recent and methodologically more sophisticated and cogent statement of the orthodox 'traditional historical materialism' can be found in Cohen (2001 [1978]).
16 As Clarke notes, this notion of production is characteristic of Althusser's early work as well.
17 For a substantiation of this general methodological argument through a detailed exposition of the developmental dynamics of the historically specific contradictory unity between materiality and social form of capitalist production (i.e. *the real subsumption of labour to capital*), which also underlies the immanent ground of modern forms of subjectivity (both capital-reproducing and capital-transcending), see Starosta (2016).

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